

# **ABC's**

## **of**

# **Freedom**

LEONARD E. READ





## PREFACE

"I am more and more impressed," notes Henry Hazlitt in *Thinking as a Science*, "with how little the individual could accomplish in any direction whatever if he had to depend entirely on his own unaided efforts. . . . He could not think at all (or only at the level of a chimpanzee) if he did not inherit from the society and civilization in which he was born the priceless gift of an already-created language. Without this he would not only be unable to reason logically, he would have nothing worthy to be called a 'concept.' He could not frame a sentence; he could not even name things. We think in words, even in conversations. Our language, concepts, and logic are part of the social inheritance of all of us."

The point is that it is a long way from an alphabet, through words and sentences and thoughts and actions, to the understanding and practice of freedom.

My purpose here is by no means to insult anyone's intelligence in offering these ABC's, but rather to share a few of the ideas I've found helpful in my study of freedom and to encourage the reader to develop his own potentialities as an exemplar of that freedom upon which our lives depend.

LEONARD E. READ  
March 31, 1976







# **A** is for **AWARENESS**

TO LIVE LIFE at its best one should, it seems to me, reason logically and deductively from a basic premise — and act accordingly. The premise from which I act is founded on three assumptions:

- We did not create ourselves for it is easily demonstrable that man knows very little about himself. Thus, an abiding belief in the primacy and supremacy of an Infinite Consciousness.
- Demonstrable also is the individual potentiality of expanding his *awareness*, perception, consciousness ever more closely into harmony with Infinite Consciousness.
- Not demonstrable but a profound belief: the immortality of the human spirit or consciousness, this earthly moment not being all there is to life. Awareness or consciousness is immortal!

Conceding these assumptions, what is man's earthly purpose? It is individual development, growth, emergence, evolution or, in other terms, the discovery and perfection of one's own uniqueness.

So, listen carefully to any idea, one's own or anyone else's. If it be antagonistic to man's earthly purpose, reject it; but if it is in harmony with and promotes that purpose, accept and abide by it. Freedom is founded on this kind of thinking.



## **B** is for **BECOMING**

WROTE HORACE twenty centuries ago, "Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous times would have lain dormant."

All of history, as I read it, is composed of evolutionary-devolutionary periods — action and reaction in a wave sequence. Presently, we are in a world-wide devolutionary slump: socialism with its millions of dictocrats and "financed" as it has to be by inflation. Anything good about this? Yes, *it is eliciting talents that otherwise would have lain dormant.*

Becoming — life's purpose — is achieved by overcoming. Devolutionary periods — such as ours—are overcome by individuals, or they overrun society.

We are overcoming! Take note of an awakening in the U.S.A., an enormous concern that is stimulating thoughts and ideas that would have remained fallow — untrained and inactive in the mind. The social devolution is resulting in individual evolution — in your and my becoming.

The key was indicated by John Milton: "Give me the liberty to know, to think, to believe, and *to utter freely*, according to conscience, above all other liberties."

Fortunately, we in America are still free to speak and write our thoughts. *Becoming has its genesis and its promise in this freedom.*



# **C** is for **COMPETITION**

MANY AMONG US insist that man is born for cooperation, not competition. Most of them readily see the blessings of cooperation, but few realize that cooperation is only a dream in the absence of competition.

Free entry into any field of endeavor — the production of goods or the supplying of services — assures competition — each trying to get out front. This competition among suppliers results in cooperation with customers. Example: When there is competition among the bakers of bread, we decide whose bread we eat — with whom we will cooperate.

The alternative to competition — the better service of customers in the free market — is coercion applied by those who would have the field exclusively to themselves. Such enslavement of others is a process of stagnation, rather than growth. And such a coercive society affords no incentive for self-improvement.

When there is competition, there are always those out front, setting the pace, leading the way. The effect of this leadership? Others have the desire to be in first place and, thus, are inspired to grow. Competition — trying to excel — is the origin of growth; it is the magnet that draws forth each man's best in the practice of freedom.





# **D** is for **DESIRE**

IF “Heaven favors good desires,” as Cervantes phrased the idea, it follows that Hell favors bad desires. Here is a sampling of desires having Heavenly favor, desires that can set our lives aright:

- The desire to stand for what is believed to be righteous regardless of what others think — the seeking of approval from God, not man.
- The desire never to do unto others that which you would not have them do unto you.
- The desire to see the good in all there is, for only as we do so can the good prevail in our daily lives and the bad disappear.
- The desire to recognize one’s countless blessings, the cure for covetousness and envy.
- The desire daily to improve an understanding of and an ability to explain the blessings of human freedom — man’s manifest destiny.

Desire ever and ever more good desires!





# **E** is for **EXCELLENCE**

IT IS NOT how much knowledge one has; the one who knows the most is but a wee candle. The individual who counts is the one who is growing. Growth writes the E for Excellence. Call it the aristocratic spirit, as did Hanford Henderson:

He may be a day laborer, an artisan, a shopkeeper, a professional man, a writer, a statesman. It is not a matter of birth, or occupation, or education. It is an attitude of mind carried into daily action . . . a religion. It is the disinterested, passionate love of excellence . . . everywhere and in everything; the aristocrat, to deserve the name, must love it in himself, in his own alert mind, in his own illuminated spirit, and he must love it in others; must love it in all human relations and occupations and activities; in all things in earth or sea or sky.

Jefferson added his thought: "There is a natural aristocracy among men; it is composed of virtues and talents."

When the aristocratic spirit is in ascendancy, the keynote of which is *Excellence*, freedom reigns!



# **F** is for **FAITH**

REFLECT on the trillions of people who have inhabited this earth. Freedom — no man-concocted restraints against the release of creative energy — can be likened to a bright star in a dark firmament. Goethe's "Miracle is the darling child of faith" warrants the conclusion that freedom is a miracle.

The nearest approach to the ideal — this miracle — had its birth in faith, a belief of our Founding Fathers that despotism could be thrown off and that government could be limited to invoking a common justice and keeping the peace. Tocqueville, after observing the American miracle in the light of events elsewhere, wisely observed, "Despotism may govern without faith, but Liberty cannot."

Socialism — the welfare state and the planned economy — founded as it is on the little-god syndrome, can govern to the point of making nonentities of the citizenry. But liberty — acting creatively as one pleases — can return and prevail only if there be a faith that such righteousness is attainable.

"He who believes is strong; he who doubts is weak. Strong convictions precede great actions." Let our faith in a return to freedom grow strong, that each of us may prosper along the lines of his uniqueness!



# G is for GOVERNMENT

*The punishment suffered by the wise who refuse to take part in government, is to live under the government of bad men.*

—Plato

PLATO's observation raises a question: How to take part in government? Did he mean to run for office, or to set straight those who seek power, or to vote for "the lesser of two evils," or what?

But first, what is meant by government? There are two kinds: (1) the agency of coercive powers, limited as we would have it, or unlimited as it mostly has been, and (2) self-government, that is, the governing of one's own thoughts and actions. It is the latter self-government that determines what the government of the society will be. Why this assertion?

Whatever shows forth on the political horizon is but an accurate reflection of whatever the preponderant leadership thinking happens to be at any given time. When the aristocratic spirit is in a slump — as at present among politicians, clergymen, educators, labor union officials, businessmen — the result is what we are now experiencing: a rapidly expanding authoritarian state.

Short of self-government, we will be governed by bad men. When we do what we ought, government will be limited and freedom will prevail. Is it not ordained in the Cosmic Order?





# **H** is for **HONESTY**

WROTE EMERSON: "I cannot find language of sufficient energy to convey my sense of the sacredness of integrity." What an unusual confession by this notable and quotable man, as religious as anyone known to me, a profound thinker, with a marvelous faculty of expressing ideas. Why this inability? Alexander Pope suggests the answer: "An honest man's the noblest work of God."

Integrity — honesty — "the noblest work of God," is the accurate reflection in word and deed of whatever one's highest conscience dictates as righteous. Thus, honesty as nearly approximates Infinite Consciousness or Godliness as one is able to ascend. Ascend high enough and the sacredness of integrity may be as unexplainable as Infinite Consciousness. Mystery!

"To be honest as the world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand." Yet, these rare individuals in their practice of the highest of all virtues are our exemplars; they point the way to truth — the way to be free.

Shakespeare wrote the formula:

To thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night, the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.





# I is for INFLUENCE

THERE IS NO FRACTION so small that it is not divisible, and no heartbeat but is felt throughout the Universe. There is no action — good or bad — that fails to exert an influence on everyone. Thus, this question: How influence others better to understand and explain the free society? Let anyone who would move mankind toward freedom *first move himself!*

Those persons who are capable of enlightenment will seek light only from the enlightened. The lesson? Never try to reform another; that is, instead of trying to forcibly draw others toward your view, strive for that perfection which will cause them to do the reaching. There is an infallible guideline in this matter: observe whether others are seeking one's tutorship. If none, there's homework to be done. Goethe shares his wisdom:

He who wishes to exert a useful influence must be careful to insult nothing. Let him not be troubled by what seems absurd, but consecrate his energies to the creation of what is good. He must not demolish, but build. He must raise temples where mankind may come and partake of the purest pleasures.

And freedom must surely be the purest of all human pleasures!



# **J** is for **JUSTICE**

GOVERNMENT, the political arm or agent of society, can have no higher aim than justice *for one and all alike*. The Goddess of Justice is blindfolded; her concern is not with who you are but, rather, with how fairly and honestly each of us deals with his fellowmen. Justice conforms to such ideals as:

- The Golden Rule.
- The principle of universality; that is, avoid any action that would bring ruin and chaos if universally practiced.
- No special privilege for anyone.
- No violation of the right to the fruits of one's own labor or the right to act creatively as one chooses.

The Goddess of Justice sides with John Stuart Mill:

The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.

Freedom and justice are inseparable.



# **K** is for **KNOWLEDGE**

IF INDIVIDUALS somehow could be ranked according to how much each knows, and if each were then asked to list those things unknown to him, it seems likely that the best informed would also have the longest list of "unknowns."

The recognition on the part of Socrates that he knew nothing but that he knew he knew nothing — the first step in wisdom — is, from an economic standpoint, the most important recognition there is. Why?

Each of us has an infinitesimal bit of know-how — expertise at this or that. When the market is free — no restrictions against production and exchange — the tiny know-hows of the millions flow naturally and easily to the prosperity of each. The knowledge is in the market, this totality, not in you or me or anyone else, the claims of the know-it-alls to the contrary notwithstanding. To paraphrase the thought of a great philosopher: Man is not born to solve the problems of the universe but, rather, to find out what he can best do. Knowing this is knowledge at the human level.

The most important ingredient in a delectable meal, a comfortable home, even in an ordinary pencil, is freedom.





# **L** is for **LOVE**

THE OXFORD DICTIONARY employs about 11,000 words to explain the meaning and nuances of "love." Here is a definition from a personal experience, not included.

My host at a seminar dinner remarked, "Since meeting you I have a new set of friends." How come? He had, until recently, been consorting with "the fast set." Now that he had become interested in the freedom philosophy, he had new friends who were likewise interested. Impressive!

That evening, while I was moderating the discussion, a phrase, "the law of love," was repeated by the participants a dozen times. Impressive!

On retiring, it occurred to me that there was a relationship between "a new set of friends" and "the law of love." Searching for an answer, I fell asleep.

The next morning, this question popped into mind: Who are my best friends? A careful inventory revealed them to be those individuals, past and present, who were giving me light or the few who might be getting an idea or two from me; in brief, those in one's enlightenment circuit.

Moments later, two ancient axioms came to mind: "God is love" and "God is light." Ergo, *love is light*.

It is this kind of love that "makes the world go round" — the kind that lights the way to freedom.





# M is for MERIT

MERIT, if it be genuine, cannot be concealed. "There is not enough darkness in the whole world to put out the light of one wee candle." As A. J. Nock suggested, the Remnant — those who are seeking light, the ones who really count — will find true merit. It cannot be hidden for long.

But merit can be depreciated by putting it on exhibit — "What a great man am I!" Instead of looking to him for light, the common reaction is to shun the person who blatantly "toots his own horn."

How, then, does one attain merit? Saint Augustine revealed the way: "*The sufficiency of my merit is to know that my merit is not sufficient.*" Knowing such humility is to know the right road, and "the road is always better than the inn." There is no arrival at some haven of perfect merit; what counts are the steps one takes.

History reveals that contemporaries see more the man than his merit. Posterity, on the other hand, sees only the merit and not the man. We have never seen Confucius, Socrates, Goethe, Emerson, and other greats of the past, but we can see and respect their merit. We do not see the authors of freedom; however, more and more of us are coming to see the merit of their work.



# N is for NOW

MOST OF US, were we to examine our thoughts, would find them occupied with the past or the future — with memories or hopes. And all to the neglect of the only moment that really counts: the ever-present Now. The Now, admittedly a child of the past, is the parent of the future. Some reflections:

- Refine any idea of the moment as quickly as possible and get all chores into the past tense. Clear the decks that each future moment may be unimpeded by the past.
- Proclaim Now, in word and deed, whatever is believed to be righteous; “by the streets of *by and by* one arrives at the house of *never*.” A right principle cannot be compromised but only adhered to or abandoned.
- Count the blessings of Now, which are many, and bear patiently the few dissatisfactions in order that perceptions — thoughts — may more easily flow to one’s advantage.
- Not time enough Now? There is more time to do the worthwhile things in life than we know how to use.
- Every good movement in history has been led by an infinitesimal few — those who take advantage of the ever-present Now!



## **O** is for **OPTIMISM**

NATURE presents us with light and dark, hot and cold, calm and blizzards, the ebb and flow of tides, greenery and deserts, oscillations on and on.

Man enters the earthly scene and adds oscillations galore: depressions and "good times," dark ages and renaissance periods, starvation and plenitude, dictatorship and freedom, et cetera.

"Isn't this an awful day," says the person who finds the weather not to his fancy. Likewise, seeing only a decline and fall and absurdities of all sorts in society, a person may vigorously denounce the bad while failing to see the good. This is pessimism, which does not advance the good.

On the other hand is the person who realizes that it is always darkest before the dawn, that there is a silver lining in every cloud, that the good is in the offing. He stands foursquare for his belief — his faith that the right will prevail. This is optimism which advances the good.

Optimism doesn't mean a blindness to what happens or fancy notions about a rosy future. Rather, it is a belief that there's a good day coming and that by emphasizing the belief the good will become a reality — *sooner!*

Freedom devotees can thank God for optimism.





# **P** is for **PROTECTION**

THERE IS a logical reason, and one only, why there should be a social agency: government. The Declaration sets it forth: “. . . all men are . . . endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness — that to secure these Rights Governments are instituted. . . .” In a word, *protection* — of life, livelihood, liberty, the pursuit of one’s creative aims.

We institute government for protection. What has our problem turned out to be? Our hoped-for defender has become an out-and-out offender — our protector turned against us!

Why this turn of events? A woeful lack of vigilance! “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” That the millions of us can grant powers to a social agency and expect it to be self-limiting is absurd. And we are paying the price for this irresponsible citizenship — our lack of vigilance.

Eternal vigilance requires that we understand the nature and danger of power, that we stand firmly against each and every governmental deviation from its limited purpose. Attention to this, day in and day out, is implicit in responsible citizenship.

Government can be our protector, if we will assume the self-responsibility of protecting ourselves against government. This we must do for freedom’s sake.





## Q is for QUEST

"SEEK and ye shall find" is an ancient formula to which we well might turn in our day and age. Perpetual quest!

Wrote Edith Hamilton: "... the shadow of 'effortless barbarism' was dark upon the earth. In that black and fierce world a little centre of white-hot spiritual energy was at work. A new civilization had arisen in Athens, unlike all that had gone before."

Aristotle revealed the secret: *Intelligent curiosity!* Men of Athens wanted to know. Truth — Infinite Wisdom — is revealed bit by tiny bit only to dedicated explorers.

Intelligent curiosity is a delicate, sensitive faculty, such as insight or intuition, and requires careful and constant cultivation. Any prolonged inattention results in atrophy, as with other faculties. Its hallmark is the incessantly probing mind, searching for what is right and just. Its companion is integrity, the accurate reflection of its revelation in word and deed.

Questing minds lead to individual growth, development, emergence — the seed and the fruit of a free society.



# **R** is for **REPENTANCE**

OUR PAST FEW DECADES have been filled with individual and social errors. And our tendency has been to ignore them as we would any minor mistake. As a consequence, these countless errors come to be a part of us.

Is there a cure for this intellectual malady — a way of erasing these errors from our systems? Yes, indeed! It is repentance or confession of error. Not to err is beyond man's power, but confession frees us from these flaws, and makes possible the pursuit of wisdom.

The first step is recognition of the error or confession to self. The second is open confession to anyone who cares to listen. "I was wrong!" There is also a third step that relates to strife at home and abroad. We err as we act not only individually but also as we act collectively. So, we must openly confess our local, state and national errors. "We, of the body politic, were wrong!"

The brilliant Alexander Solzhenitsyn speaks with authority on this subject: ". . . true repentance and self-limitation will shortly reappear in the personal and social sphere, that a hollow place in modern man is ready to receive them."

One thing seems certain: The need for this correction of error and a return to freedom is no less urgent in America than in Russia.



# **S** is for **SELF-INTEREST**

HOW OFTEN what's good is denigrated, classified with the bad! "Self-interest" is a case in point. More often than not it is associated with greed, selfishness, "the root of all sin." One reason for this confusion is the absence of an adjective. *Enlightened* self-interest ranks high among the virtues of individual and social conduct. Or, as William Graham Sumner puts it:

. . . making the most of one's self . . . is not a separate thing from filling one's place in society, but the two are one, and the latter is accomplished when the former is done.

Am I to look after you? Perish such an egotistical thought! Making of oneself the right kind of a person is the highest of ambitions and is the only way of being helpful to others.

"What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul." The fountain of Judeo-Christian charity is self-interest — at once profitable and soul-saving. Why? Sharing one's bread with another in distress is one's preference or he wouldn't do it: *psychic* profit.

Praise enlightened self-interest, that others may see the light and free themselves.





# **T** is for **TEACHER**

**THERE ARE** “teachers” and Teachers. The former exist by the thousands; the latter are few and far between.

The term “teacher” is a self-proclaimed label while Teacher is a title bestowed by others. The Teacher is one who is in search of Truth and to whom, if he achieves enlightenment, others of us look for the Truth he perceives. The Teacher is a seeker, for that which he knows not; the “teacher” is a preacher attempting to insinuate into the minds of others that which he “knows.”

We need only bear in mind that learning is a taking-from, not an injection-into, process. Each individual is in charge of his own doors of perception and admits only that which he chooses. Thus, to qualify as a Teacher, one must achieve those intellectual heights that will attract others seeking to advance.

The free market, private ownership, limited government way of life, with its moral and spiritual antecedents, would be featured by Teachers. As it is now, “teachers” abound in all walks of life; they retard rather than advance the freedom philosophy.

Let each of us try to be a Teacher for freedom’s sake!



# **U** is for **UNDERSTANDING**

WE TEND TO SCORN that which we do not understand. For instance, those who do not see the purpose of difficult problems — obstacles to overcome — scorn them as nuisances; they retreat from life rather than getting ever deeper into it.

Likewise, those who have no idea how freedom works its wonders scorn a way of life they do not understand and, as a consequence, lend their voices and votes to the planned economy and welfare state: socialism. They are victims of their blindness!

While a few are keenly aware of the miracles wrought by freedom, there is no one, to my knowledge, who understands how adequately to explain a phenomenon so high in the evolution of man that it borders on the celestial! This is a challenge in understanding — now and forever! Your role and mine?

- Gratitude for this problem and its value to us as we try to cope with it.
- Probe and probe, seeking perfection in exposition. As we do this, you and I will *share* our findings with each other — our wee lights together resulting in a brighter illumination.

To the extent that its wonders are explained with clarity, to that extent will we welcome rather than scorn freedom.



## V is for VOLITION

“THE KEY PROBLEM of man in society today,” advises Sylvester Petro, “is not individualism against collectivism . . . but rather of *volitional activity against compelled action . . . man and his voluntary associations as against man and his compelled associations.*”

There is a role for each type of action. How draw the line? Government should use its compulsive action to inhibit, prohibit, penalize all violence, fraud, misrepresentation, theft; its role is to invoke a common justice and keep the peace. What then should be left to voluntary associations, to the exercise of free will? All else without exception!

Merely recognize that everything we think, write, or do is in association with others past and present. I thus associate myself with Petro and all those over the ages who have contributed to his thinking. Also, I join with the countless thousands over the decades who have helped produce my typewriter — on and on. These infinite volitional activities go beyond free choice of church and religion, school and education, freedom of speech and of the press, and the like.

Any person should be allowed to act creatively as he, not someone else, determines. Such volitional action — *freedom of choice* — is the definition of freedom.





# W is for WORDS

IT HAS BEEN SAID that the written word, unpublished, can be destroyed, but that the spoken word can never be recalled. True, but words that convey an unintended meaning can be confessed as errors and clarified. Finding words for common sense — for the freedom philosophy — leads into a world without end or, better yet, words without end.

So, let me confess and try to clarify. I have been saying that *laissez-faire* means “a fair field and no favor.” Wrong! It should be phrased, “a fair field and no favoritism.”

Favor, in the sense of “a kind, obliging, friendly, or generous act,” should never be disparaged. Favors are the very constitution of the free market, private ownership, limited government way of life. Although rarely recognized, every creative act of all the individuals who live or have lived, is a favor to you and me.

Favoritism — “being unfairly partial” — is not for us; we prefer the favors of freedom. We live by such favors without knowing who our benefactors are!



# **X** is for **THE UNKNOWN**

*X is the symbol of objects obscure  
And objects unseen, with a mystic allure:  
The yet undiscovered, impending  
and vast,  
Is greater than all we have learned  
in the past.* —Ralph Bradford

WE NOW CELEBRATE the Bicentennial, doing honor to the greatest political document ever written: the Declaration of Independence. Appearing simultaneously was one of the most enlightening books of all times: Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.

Reflect on Smith's report that in the Highlands of Scotland, only 200 years ago, a mother had to give birth to twenty children to assure two reaching adulthood. Such was the poverty and the infant mortality rate!

"Objects obscure"? Beyond the imagination of even Adam Smith are the millions of goods and services that have rescued the masses, making infant mortality the lowest and longevity the highest in human history! The explanation of this phenomenon? Freedom! Less organized force standing against the release of creative energy than ever before!

"The yet-undiscovered, impending and vast, is greater than all we have learned in the past." On one condition: the preservation of free market, private ownership, limited government ideas and ideals. The X factor is freedom.



## **Y** is for **YOUTH**

YOUTH is the wellspring of perhaps the most important freedom of all. Emerson is one of the few who recognized this fact: "Teach men that *each generation* begins the world afresh, *in perfect freedom*; that the present is not the prisoner of the past, but that today holds captive all the yesterdays, to judge, to accept, to reject their teachings, as they are shown by its morning sun."

Why not teach ourselves that each individual daily begins his world afresh? If we are generating — growing — is not each day, regardless of age, a new generation in a refined sense of that term? Need we be prisoners of ideas and notions accepted or embraced yesterday? Can we not better judge them — accept or reject — if our own light be brighter? A flowering enlightenment is implicit in growth.

Youthfulness in mind and spirit is the antidote for hopelessness. It is the fountain of good tidings!





## **Z** is for **ZEST**

THERE ARE a few who understand and agree with Arthur Gordon, "Vast untapped sources of energy exist in every one of us." Most persons, at least for brief periods, have experienced "a tremendous surge of confidence, creativity, well-being." But, more often than not, "the circuit is broken and we're our old humdrum selves again." The problem is to unlock this latent power day in and day out — for life.

The secret of perpetual self-renewal? It is Zest — "eager interest and enthusiasm." As Emerson wrote, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm."

An understanding keen enough to explain the manner in which freedom works its wonders surely must rank high on the scale of man's spiritual evolution. Unless we approach that challenge with Zest, freedom stands no chance.

However, the chances are improved because enlightened self-interest urges us to unlock our latent powers. What higher aim than self-realization! As one grandmother phrased it, "Love life and it will love you right back." Love to explain why freedom works its wonders and freedom will bless us.



## THE AUTHOR

Leonard E. Read has served as President of the Foundation for Economic Education since he helped to found it in 1946. He is the author of numerous articles and books, his latest being **The Love of Liberty**.

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